



The National Park Service

A Guide to River Use in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve



Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve has many rivers and streams that provide boaters an opportunity to experience waters that are wild and ever changing. River travel within Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve is known for its scenic beauty and pristine campsites. Each season, an increasing number of people travel the same river corridor and the, fragile riverside areas are beginning to show evidence of higher use.

While you travel the rivers and camp on the riversides of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, please consider how you can minimize your impact and have a safe trip. Here are some tips to make your visit safer, more enjoyable, and give those that follow you the same opportunity for a memorable Alaskan river trip.

Plan Ahead – Be Safe

Careful planning will decrease your impact on river corridors and at the same time make your trip more enjoyable. Having knowledge about the river you plan to travel and taking the proper equipment will help make your trip safer. Always leave a float plan with someone indicating when you are leaving, your planned route, including put-in and take-out points, when you will return, and who to contact if you have not returned on time. Backcountry Trip Plans can be filed at any ranger station or the Park Visitor Center in Copper Center, Alaska (907-822-7261). If you do file a Backcountry Trip Plan, please notify the Park when you return.

Check with area land management agencies for river conditions and regulations specific to the area you plan to visit. For general information regarding Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve con-

tact the Park Visitor Center. Park rangers can give you information about the waterways in the Park and Preserve and may be able to provide you with first hand trip reports. Obtain current weather forecasts, and information on water levels and what kind of fluctuations or hazards you might expect.

A U.S. Geological Survey topographical map, 1:63,360 scale, of the area you plan to visit and a compass will be valuable tools in preparing for your trip as well as navigating your planned route. Your map should allow you to keep track of your progress as you travel. Be aware that there is privately owned land within the Park and Preserve. Land status maps are available at the Park Visitor Center. An Alaska road map will help identify road access points for the road-accessible rivers within the vicinity of the Park and Preserve.

Camping

Campsites tend to be concentrated in a very small strip along the riverbanks. It is possible to minimize the impact of these campsites by following a few guidelines. When selecting a campsite, try to camp on beaches, sand or gravel bars or non-vegetated sites below the high waterline. These areas are most resistant to impact and when the river floods, signs of your stay will be washed away. Avoid camping on lichen covered tundra which is easily damaged and less resilient. Camp at least 100 feet from fresh, clear water sources. Check for signs of bear activity and avoid

areas of obvious high use such as salmon spawning streams. Camp a quarter mile away from active Bald Eagle or other raptor nests.

Once you have selected a campsite practice “Leave No Trace” camping skills. Since you will be in bear country, cook and store food in bear resistant containers 100 yards from your campsite. We recommend that you bring drinking water or treat water taken from streams. Wash dishes and yourself 100 feet away from water sources and minimize your use of soap.

If you must build a fire, make a small fire in a shallow pit on sand or gravel and dispose of ashes in the river. Using a fire pan is another option. Hub-caps, gold pans, and old backyard barbecue grills are some economical, easily portable ideas for making a fire pan. After putting the fire out, throw the ashes into the river. Before disposing of ashes, remove and pack out any trash left that has not burned completely, especially foil.

Avoid creating social trails by taking a variety of different routes when hiking around your camp. Do not disturb fish camps or fish traps, fishnets or fish wheels. The annual salmon run is an important subsistence resource to many Alaskans. Do not remove artifacts or otherwise disturb any archeological sites, including old cabins and their contents. These historic and prehistoric sites are important resources and are protected by federal law.

Pack It In, Pack It Out

Leave your campsite clean, making sure you remove all litter. Repackaging food supplies in reusable containers and removing excess packaging before your trip will reduce the trash you have to pack out. Bring equipment for straining dishwater and extra garbage bags for carrying out trash.



Carry all human waste. If you cannot pack out human waste you will need to bury it. Dig a small hole at least four to eight inches deep, preserving the topsoil and vegetation. After use replace the soil and vegetation carefully. Make sure human waste is buried at least 200 feet from any water source. Try to urinate on rocks or sandy areas. All toilet paper and feminine hygiene products should be placed in airtight plastic bags and packed out.

Be Prepared for Alaskan Rivers

Since many of the most popular rivers for travel in the Park originate from glaciers you will be presented with challenges you may not have encountered elsewhere. Glacial rivers are braided and carry an extremely high level of silt creating navigational challenges. Spring run-off, heavy rain or even hot temperatures can cause dramatic daily fluctuations in water levels. These rivers are extremely cold and hypothermia is a danger even after a brief submersion regardless of ambient air temperature. In addition to the dangers presented by glacial waters, you must be prepared for other, more commonly encountered river hazards. Sweepers, trees that bend low over the water, or strainers, trees that have fallen completely across a waterway, are found on many rivers, as are logjams that are deposited by spring floods and other high water events.

When you arrive at a difficult or hazardous stretch of water, stop, scout ahead and line from a safe location on the bank or portage around the hazard to a safe area. Be extra cautious since help may be hours or more likely days away.

Always wear an approved, well-fitting personal flotation device while boating or fishing on any body of water and wear a helmet and wet or dry suit when appropriate. Dress warmly in layers of wool or synthetic materials that will keep you warm when wet. Pack your gear in waterproof bags and take at least one complete change of clothes and plenty of waterproof matches. Always tie your boat down when not in use to prevent rising water or the wind from taking it down the river without you.



The rivers of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve offer visitors adventure and solitude. It is possible to travel for days at a time without seeing another person, trail, sign or bridge. Each river visitor is responsible for minimizing his or her impact on the river corridor to preserve the wild and pristine character of the river. Make “leaving no trace” of your visit and the safe completion of your journey down river the goals for your Alaskan adventure.